

## On Bharata Natyam

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Indian philosophers and religious teachers have debated long and hard about the nature of the world and humanity's place in it; and different schools of thought have advanced different solutions to the problems of appearance and reality, good and evil, duty and desire, spirituality and sensuality. But all the competing formulations have at least two things in common: a belief in the underlying unity of existence and a determination to exclude no aspect of life in the search for the meaning of life. This insistence that all the pieces must ultimately fit together in a satisfying whole has shaped Hinduism's attitude toward the body. Far from being seen as an impediment to spiritual enlightenment, the body is treated as a tool for achieving greater insight and understanding. Is it any wonder that in India—where the gods dance—the dancing body can be both a source of pleasure and a vehicle of worship?

Dance in India takes a bewildering variety of forms. Of these, two in particular—*bharata natyam* and *kathakali*—exemplify the ways in which dance and religion intersect in Indian life.... Bharata natyam is a solo for a highly trained female dancer; it traces its origins to the devotional dances once performed within Hindu temples.

...The Natya Sastra (the Hindu tradition's "theatre manual") asserts that dance drama, properly performed, "emboldens the weak, energizes the heroic, enlightens the ignorant and imparts erudition to the scholars" by showing humanity and divinity as they really are.

This high purpose is accomplished by arousing certain emotional states in the audience—not ordinary, transitory emotions but emotions "universalized" to reveal what is common in everyone's experience. Such emotions are called *rasas* (after the Sanskrit word for flavor, or juice). The Natya Shastra identifies eight fundamental *rasas*; these can be rendered into English as love, humor, pathos, anger, heroism, terror, disgust, and wonder. (Later commentators added a ninth *rasa*, serenity, which is said to encompass all the others.)

A dramatic performance should aim at the arousal of *rasa* in the audience. The eight (or nine) *rasas* must be distinguished from the thirty-three "transitory" feelings, which include despondency, languor, envy, and elation; these feelings are personal in a way that the aesthetically refined *rasas* are not. Those in the audience who experience the *rasa* of love are not "in love" with the performer or the character portrayed, any more than those who experience the *rasa* of anger are led to begin fighting with the people sitting next to them. The Natya Shastra compares *rasa* to the experience of eating an especially good meal. In South India, where spices are abundant and the cuisine is pungent and aromatic, a single dish may contain many different condiments. But rather than focus on the individual flavors, the gourmet derives pleasure from the overall impression produced by their blend. In the same way, the attention of the *rasika*, the knowledgeable spectator, is drawn to the underlying unity of the aesthetic experience, which at its peak resembles the bliss of the religious devotee contemplating the deity.

To realize this aspiration requires a joint effort by performer and audience. In classical forms like bharata natyam and kathakali, the performer is expected to bring the same single-minded dedication to a performance as the devotee brings to a prescribed ritual. The rasika must come prepared to appreciate the nuances of the performance and, by his vocal and physical responses, to enhance the performer's ability to evoke rasa, which in turn will heighten the rasika's responses. Instead of a separation between performer and spectator, the goal is a collaboration, a shared experience of rasa. Since physical control is essential to the performer's art, it is the performer's duty to bring his body under as complete control as possible. The techniques go far beyond anything taught in Western theater. For example, the Natya Shastra enumerates seven movements of the eyebrow and nine movements of the eyelid that must be mastered in order to evoke rasa properly.

The contemporary dance form known as bharata natyam is a direct descendent of the devotional dances performed in the temples of south India from about the tenth century until the middle of this century.... With the flowering of temple worship in the south, in what is now the state of Tamil Nadu, there emerged a special class of temple servants called *devadasis*. These were women who were "married to the god of the temple, somewhat as Roman Catholic nuns are wed to Christ; one of their tasks was to please the god with offerings of dance in which passages from Sanskrit texts were interpreted. Evidence for this practice can be found on the walls of many Indian temples which are decorated with reliefs of dancers in hundreds of graceful poses familiar to devotees of Indian dance today...

According to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, one of India's foremost dance scholars, the Indian dancer uses the body to suggest an abstract, universal form. Unlike classical Western dance, such as ballet, the conquest of gravity through impressive leaps has no part in bharata natyam technique: "The Indian dancer's preoccupation is not so much with space as with time, and the dancer is constantly trying to achieve the perfect pose which will convey a sense of timelessness." For this reason the dancer emphasizes not the muscles of her body but the skeleton, the joints and the underlying bone structure. The result is a "sculpturesque" quality in which all movement begins and ends in a moment of balance—visualized as a straight line dividing the body in half from head to foot.

The bharata natyam dancer appears on stage wrapped in a sari-like garment of brightly colored silk, highlighted in gold, over leggings of the same material; from her waist falls a fan-pleated apron that swings open when she bends at the knees, her bare feet joined heel to heel beneath her in the characteristic pose seen in so many temple reliefs. The edges of her feet are outlined in bright red paint; around each ankle she wears a circlet of bells, and her hair, ears, neck, nose, and wrists are hung with jewelry. But the moment the dance begins any suggestion of pliant femininity in the dancer's appearance is belied by the sheer athleticism, the bodily control, the strength and power of her every movement. A bharata natyam performance blends two complementary styles of movement: abstract dance sequences that stress virtuosity and rhythmic improvisation, and expressive dance sequences that seek to interpret classical poetry through mime. The dancer, who is accompanied onstage by a drummer, two other instrumentalists, and a singer, is also the choreographer; she determines the basic rhythm cycles, the poetic text to be used, and the specific interpretation of the text.

In the abstract dance sequences, dancer and drummer play off each other as in a jazz ensemble, except that the goal is not to make a personal statement but to explore, with a kind of selfless joy, the endlessly intriguing possibilities of interlocking rhythms. As her feet beat out a complex tattoo on the ground, the sound enhanced by the jingling of her ankle bells, the dancer becomes a percussion instrument who interweaves her cadences with the beat laid down by the drummer. Connoisseurs of the art claim they can judge the worth of a performer with their eyes closed. In the expressive dance sequences, the singer establishes a mood by chanting a poetic verse, and the dancer elaborates on it in mime, using movements of her upper body, hand gestures, and facial expressions. The poetry is typically drawn from the allegorical genre of Indian literature that employs erotic language to evoke spiritual ecstasy—as in these lines from the *Gita Govinda* (Song of Krishna as Cowherd) by the twelfth-century poet Jayadeva:

Make a mark with liquid deer musk on my moonlit brow!  
Make a moon shadow, Krishna! The sweat drops are dried....  
Fix flowers in shining hair loosened by loveplay, Krishna!  
Make a flywhisk outshining peacock plumage to be the banner of Love....  
My beautiful loins are a deep cavern to take the thrusts of love—  
Cover them with jeweled girdles, cloths, and ornaments, Krishna!

The dancer mimes the actions of each character in turn: Krishna the divine lover, Radha his beloved, and Radha's female friend and confidant. During these dramatic passages, knowledgeable spectators focus on the performer's arms, hands, and eyes; as she shifts back and forth between the three roles, she is judged by her interpretive skills and by the depth of the emotional response she elicits from the audience. While many of the hand gestures are standard—their codification goes back to the *Natya Sastra*—the dancer has a certain leeway in the way she approaches a scene. For example, in the legends of Krishna's childhood, the young god's mother catches him eating mud and orders him to open his mouth; when he does, she beholds the entire cosmos behind his jaws. Rather than attempt to mime "the cosmos," the dancer may choose to capture the essence of the scene by reproducing the look of wonder in the mother's eyes as she fathoms the true nature of the son she has raised.

The preparation of a *bharata naryam* dancer is often compared to that of a ballet dancer. Instruction and physical training begin at an early age, typically six or seven. Like ballet dancers, *bharata natyam* performers must first master a vocabulary of basic steps, positions, and gestures, out of which the most complex dance sequences can be fashioned; and like ballet, *bharata natyam* requires enormous powers of concentration and bodily discipline.